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Defending The Faith: Nascent Black Theology As An Apology For Christianity

More than any other issue in the history of African American religious thought, the meaning of Christianity and its relation to Black oppression has generated ongoing controversy and debate. In fact, no interpretation of Black life in America can ignore the manner in which the debate concerning Christianity impacted the social, political, and religious dimensions of the African American freedom struggle, particularly the civil rights and Black Power movements of the late 1940s, '50s and '60s.

This essay addresses the question African Americans asked during those years: Is Christianity a liberating reality in African American life, or is it an oppressive force that hinders Black liberation? It is no accident that this question concerning the efficacy of Christianity intensified during the civil rights and Black Power movements. As Black people's hope concerning integration soared in the post-World War II years, so did their belief that Christianity was the force that would help them to realize the beloved community envisioned by Martin Luther King, Jr. But the optimism of the 1950s and early '60s turned to hopelessness and despair as Blacks in the urban North discovered that the passage of civil rights legislation had no bearing on their economic plight. As the gap between the promise of democracy and the reality of poverty widened, so did the perception that Christianity provided the solution to Black oppression. Increasingly alienated from the structures of White power, young Blacks began to feel that violence

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was the only way to make their voices heard. Significantly, this mounting disillusionment was accompanied by harsh critiques of Christianity leveled by the Nation of Islam, Black Power militants, and radical Black clergy who were sensitive to the cries of the masses.

Christianity and the Emergence of Black Power

Black Power made a dramatic impact upon African American churches. Indeed, the urban rebellions that swept across the country between 1963 and 1968 reflected the mounting frustration of African American youth who were deeply alienated from the mainstream of American life. During these turbulent years young African Americans, especially those in the ghettos of the urban North, quickly turned away from the ideologies of integration and nonviolence to embrace the philosophies of Black Nationalism and self-defence. Also important for understanding the emergence of Black Power, however, is the frustration African American youth directed toward the Black church, an institution they considered unresponsive to their radical, nationalist consciousness. The nationalist teachings of Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X had a profound impact on the younger, more militant leaders of the civil rights movement. Elijah Muhammad's claim that "Christianity is the white man's religion" influenced many African Americans' perception of Christianity and the Black church. As Gayraud Wilmore noted:

> Many Blacks, young and old, would not follow Malcolm into the Nation of Islam, but believed he spoke the truth about Christianity being a religion for White people. Once they were convinced of this, no traditional Negro Christian evangelicalism

> could satisfy their religious needs and hold them within the Black Christian church.[1]

Indeed, the relentless critique of the Nation of Islam and the ascendancy of Black Power caused "the credibility of the Christian faith to be severely tested" in Black ghettoes across the nation.[2] Increasingly, young African Americans began to view the Black church as an "Uncle Tom" institution that was irrelevant to the concerns of youth during a new age of Black Power and Black pride. Christianity was on trial in the African American community. If it was to be acquitted of the charges, then Black preachers and theologians would have to reinterpret the gospel so that it spoke to the specific needs of young people who were tired of the "love your enemy," nonviolent Christian ethics of pre-Black Power religious leaders. In fact, this generational debate over the efficacy of Christianity as an instrument of social change signaled the end of the integration- oriented civil rights movement. What factors contributed to this change, and how did those factors change the direction of mainstream African American religious thought?

At the conclusion of the James Meredith "March Against Fear," Floyd Mckissick (who had just replaced James Farmer as the leader of the Congress of Racial Equality) said, "1966 shall be remembered as the year we left our imposed status of Negroes and became Black Men... when Black men realized their full worth in society—their dignity and their beauty—and their power."[3]

In many ways this remark accurately describes the repercussions of Black Power in the African-American community. Unfortunately, its male-exclusive language also reflects the blatant

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[1]Gayraud Wilmore, "Introduction" in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*. Edited by Gayraud Wilmore and James Cone (Orbis Book: Maryknoll, 1979), p.69.
[2]See Gayraud Wilmore's NCBC Theological Commission Report, Fall 1968, in Warner Traynham, *Christian Faith in Black and White*_(Wakefield, MA: Parameter Press, 1973), p.83.
[3]See Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), p. 106.

sexism that characterized the movement and the subsequent development of Black theology.[4]

After the Meredith March the spotlight of national attention turned away from Martin L. King, Jr. and the ideology of integration to focus on Stokely Carmichael and the concept of Black Power. It did not take long for integrationist leaders such as Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young to repudiate Black Power as Black separatism and reverse racism. Leaders of the National Baptist Convention, meeting in Chicago in the summer of 1966, were also quick to denounce the Black Power slogan.[5] Meanwhile, Black Power advocates sought to clarify the concept via press conferences, pamphlets, newspaper articles, books, and television appearances. In their book *Black Power*, Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton explained that Black Power had nothing to do with Black hatred or racism, but was rather a call for Blacks to consolidate their economic and political resources in order to acquire power. It was a call for unity and a sense of community wherein Black people would be proud of their heritage and reject the racist institutions and values of American society.[6]

Notwithstanding attempts to clarify it, Black Power had more of a revolutionary spirit than a specific political or economic program to recommend. It was, moreover, a radical critique of the integrationist, nonviolent civil rights movement and its Christian foundation. Militant Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activists rejected the notion that longsuffering, love, nonviolence, and redemptive suffering could ever produce freedom for Black people. Having seen too many Blacks beaten senseless while the FBI stood by and took notes, SNCC activists grew weary

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[4]For a discussion of sexism in the Black Power movement and Black theology, see Paula Giddings, *When And Where I Enter: The Impact Of Sex And Race in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984) pp.314-324, and James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), pp. 127-139.

[5]Robert Brisbane, *Black Activism* (New York: Vantage Press, 1972), p. 146.

[6]Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 44.

of appeals to the moral conscience of the nation. They pointed out that bullets had no morals, "and white folks had plenty more bullets than they did conscience."[7] Gradually, these young but seasoned freedom fighters became convinced that a new approach was needed to confront the brutality of White racism. More than anyone else, Julius Lester captured the feelings of these young revolutionaries:

> We used to sing "I Love Everybody" as we ducked bricks and bottles. Now we sing "Too much love, too much love, Nothing kills a nigger like too much love." We know, because we still get headaches from the beatings we took while love, love, loving. We know, because we died on those highways and in those jail cells, died trying to change the hearts of men who had none. We know, those of us who're twenty-three and have bleeding ulcers. We know, those of us who'll never be quite right again. We know that nothing kills a nigger like too much love.[8]

Many of the young civil rights activists who converted to Black Power also began to question the assumption that nonviolence was the only Christian means of struggle. Could one lay claim to the Christian faith and also *reject* nonviolence? Julius Lester, himself the son of a minister, not only rejected nonviolence but seemed to advocate retribution:

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[7]Julius Lester, *Look Out Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!* (New York: Dial Press, 1968), pp. 10-11.
[8]*Ibid.*, p. 107.

> The race war, if it comes, will come partly from the necessity for revenge. You can't do what has been done to blacks and not expect retribution. The very act of retribution is liberating, and perhaps it is no accident that the symbolism of Christianity speaks of being washed in Blood as an act of purification.[9]

Indeed, the rhetoric of young Black Power militants called for a road to freedom that involved "*preying* not praying," and "*swinging* not singing." Many of them labeled Martin King and other ministers as "Rev. Sambos," while others repudiated Christianity altogether as "the white man's religion." The rhetoric of violence replaced the traditional Christian emphasis on patience and redemptive suffering. It was in this context that a small group of clergymen from across the nation rallied to the defense of the Christian faith by seeking to reinterpret it in light of Black Power.

The National Committee of Black Churchmen: Defenders Of The Faith

By the end of 1966 young activists had succeeded in making Black Power the litmus test of authentic Black leadership. Those who rejected it (e.g., Roy Wilkins of the NAACP and Whitney Young of the National Urban League) were called Uncle Toms, while those who supported it were regarded legitimate leaders. Consequently, Dr. Nathan Hare, a Black Power advocate and

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[9]*Ibid.*, p. 137.

professor of sociology at Howard University, claimed that the Black Power slogan has "the capacity for separating the black sheep from the colored goats among Negro leaders."[10] Using this criterion, the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (changed to National Conference of Black Churchmen in 1968) must be considered black sheep, or legitimate Black leaders in tune with the feelings of the masses. Not many weeks after the cry of Black Power was raised on the Meredith March, this *ad hoc* group of Black clergymen issued a statement in support of the new controversial slogan.

The statement that appeared in the July 31, 1966 edition of the *New York Times* marked a major turning point in the history of the civil rights movement and the Black church. By endorsing the call for Black Power, the NCBC moved away from the primary emphasis on interracial reconciliation as defined by pre-Black Power religious thinkers such as Benjamin Mays, Howard Thurman, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and toward a new interpretation of Christianity that focused on Blackness and power. By pointing out the limitations of the integration-oriented civil rights movement and articulating a theological justification for Black Power, the NCBC laid the foundation for contemporary Black theology.

The NCBC argued that the acquisition of Black Power was a precondition for any meaningful reconciliation between Blacks and Whites. Although some pre-Black Power religious thinkers identified the issue of power relationship (as opposed to race prejudice) as the major source of tension in the 1940s, the dominant ideology that shaped the civil rights movement was integration, not the celebration of Blackness and the attainment of group power.[11] By underscoring power instead of Christian love and interracial har-

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[10]Nathan Hare, "Black Power Symposium," in *Negro Digest*, (November, 1966), p. 93.
[11]See William S. Nelson, "Religion and Racial Tension in America Today," in the *Journal of Religious Thought* (Spring-Summer, 1945), pp. 163-166.

mony the NCBC initiated an important shift in African American religious thought.

The focus on the achievement of institutional group power instead of the attainment of individual constitutional rights, demonstrates the discontinuity between the NCBC position and that of pre-Black Power religious thinkers. However, the NCBC's firm belief that Black Power must lead to more effective participation "at all levels of the life of our nation" (read integration), shows that there is also continuity between pre- and post-Black Power religious thought. More than anyone else, Vincent Harding's analysis of NCBC documents supports my claim that the organization served as a bridge linking pre- and post-Black Power African American religious thought. Harding observed that while early NCBC documents used the radical rhetoric of the Black Power movement, the substance of their statements was basically consistent with the integrationist stance of Benjamin Mays and Martin King.[12]

Like Benjamin Mays and Elijah Muhammad, the NCBC preachers criticized the otherworldly character of the Black church. To be sure, this criticism made by Christian integrationists and non-Christian nationalists alike is a major characteristic of African American religious thought before and after Black Power. The July 1966 statement reiterated this well-known critique:

> Too often the Negro church has steered its members away from the reign of God in this world to a distorted and complacent view of an otherworldly conception of God's power. We commit ourselves as churchmen to make more meaningful in the life

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[12]See Vincent Harding's analysis of NCBC documents in his "No Turning Back," in *Renewal* 10 (Oct.-Nov. 1970).

> of our institutions our conviction that Jesus Christ reigns in the "here" and "now" as well as in the future he brings upon us.[13]

This type of self-criticism was a recurring theme in early NCBC public statements. No doubt, the scathing nationalist critique of Christianity made by Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X compelled the NCBC clergy to confront publicly the weaknesses of the Black church. That is why I argue that one cannot understand the rise of NCBC and the subsequent development of Black theology without appreciating how the nationalist critique of Christianity (which was widely embraced by young Black Power advocates) forced African American pastors and theologians to rally to the defense of biblical Christianity. The prophetic leadership of the Black church, especially in the ghettoes of the urban North, knew that if they did not respond immediately to the charges made by the Black nationalists, they would not be able to minister effectively in their communities.

The dynamism of the Black Power movement provided the clergy with a sense of urgency as they sought to preserve the credibility of the Christian faith in the wake of the revolution. African American ministers in the predominantly White denominations did not care that their White colleagues upbraided them for throwing their arms around what Whites considered the "unChristian" secular ideology of Black Power. Likewise, radical ministers in the historically Black denominations were also determined to move beyond the traditional conservative stance of their respective church hierarchies. In fact, African American pastors in both White and Black denominations were united in their determi-

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[13]"Black Power," in Wilmore and Cone, *Black Theology*, p. 27.

nation to respond creatively to the challenge of Black Power.

Prophetic Black ministers acknowledged that there was a measure of truth in the nationalist claim that "Christianity is the white man's religion." They confessed that the contemporary Black church had failed to "celebrate, preserve and enhance the integrity of Blackness under the Lordship of Christ" in the tradition of the historic Black church. Instead of dismissing Elijah Muhammad's nationalist critique forthwith, these African American clergy openly confessed their own apostasy and admitted complicity in the oppression of their own people.

The NCBC simply expressed what many in the Black urban communities already knew. But the significance of their confession is that instead of remaining silent about this painful reality, they publicly acknowledged their guilt. Perhaps they were motivated by the biblical claim that those who purport to be sinless are liars, and that confession is the precondition for all meaningful repentance (I John 1:8-10).

Just as the early Christians rejoiced in the assurance that God forgives penitent sinners, the NCBC preachers gladly interpreted Black Power as the means by which God would restore the Black church to integrity and obedience.

> We rejoice in the Black Power Movement, which is not only the renewed hope for Black people, but gives the Black Church once again, its reason for existing. We call upon Black churchmen everywhere to embrace the Black Power Movement, to divest themselves of the traditional churchly functions and goals which do not respond to the needs of a downtrodden, oppressed and alienated people.[14]

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[14]"The Church in the Urban Crisis," in Wilmore and Cone, p. 46.

African-American pastors in White denominations were especially sensitive to the nationalist charge that Black preachers were representatives of "the White man's Christianity." Gilbert H. Caldwell, the first Black district superintendent in the history of New England Methodism, expressed this concern in a way that demonstrates his awareness that Christianity was on trial in the African American community:

> Is it or is it not possible to be black and true to the aspirations of the black community and still be a part of white Christianity? The jury is still out on that one, and it will not be coming in with the verdict for some time to come.[15]

The work of NCBC and the denominational Black caucuses was so decisive that Caldwell answered his own question with a statement fashioned after the style of Nation of Islam testimonials:

> All praises be to the National Committee of Black Churchmen, to the black caucus movement as it has developed in all the white denominations...I have the feeling that if these structures had not emerged a lot of us would have received "calls" to preach in places other than the church.[16]

Regarded as "ecclesiastical renegades, denominational radicals, and mad preachers,"[17] the NCBC clergy were aware of the

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[15]Gilbert H. Caldwell, "Black Folk in White Churches," in *The Christian Century* (February 12, 1969), p. 209.
[16]*Ibid.*
[17]Leon Watts, "The National Committee of Black Churchmen," in *Christianity and Crisis* (November 2 and 6, 1970), p. 239.

pivotal role they played. Leon Watts aptly captured their predicament:

> We found ourselves regarded as the true "outsiders": neither fish nor fowl; not really the enemy, but not really the recognized ally of the Black community. Standing between us and the Black community was "white Christianity" which we allegedly represented. That impression needed to be corrected post haste.[18]

With the assistance of religious scholars and theologians such as James Cone, Henry Mitchell, Gayraud Wilmore, J. Deotis Roberts, and Preston Williams, NCBC began to confront the charge that they were representatives of White Christianity. Through the work of its Theological Commission, established at the Dallas convocation (1967) and chaired by Gayraud Wilmore, the organization initiated a theological perspective on the Christian faith that underscored liberation as the essence of the gospel. Unlike the pre-Black Power religious thought which embraced integration and minimized the significance of race, the nascent theological perspective of NCBC celebrated Blackness and made it a central theological category. The creation of a fully developed Black theology became one of NCBC's major concerns, dominating the discussions at the October 1968 convocation in St. Louis.[19] The following summer in Atlanta, the organization issued a statement on Black Theology, defining it as a theology of Black liberation that:

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[18]*Ibid.*

[19]For an important discussion of the 1968 St. Louis convocation, see Grant Shockley, "Ultimatum and Hope," in *Christian Century* (February 12, 1969). Describing the conference, Shockley wrote: "Obvious to even a casual observer at St. Louis was the evidence of a revolution among black church bodies and black constituencies in white church groups. A totally new stance by Negroes toward the concept and existence of blackness as it pertains to self, history, theology and church life and society was evident." p. 218. See also *Time* (November 15, 1968), p. 78.

> seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity.[20]

Notwithstanding its limitations,[21] NCBC's creative response to the challenge of Black Power helped regain the credibility of Christianity in Black urban communities across the nation. It was this potential to make Christian faith once again relevant to the liberation of the oppressed that caused excitement and activity during this period in the Black religious community in particular and American Protestantism in general.

NCBC leaders such as J. Metz Rollins (the organization's first executive director and the present pastor of St. Augustine Presbyterian Church in the Bronx, N.Y) proclaimed the "coming of age" of the Black church. Rollins declared that the Black church, having learned from the community's emphasis on Black Power and Black consciousness, "has matured in an acute awareness of its own unique gifts, its own peculiar understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and a new appreciation of its own hallowed and tortured history."[22] Convinced that this revitalized Black church would benefit the entire Christian community, Rollins articulated what he and others understood to be its messianic role:

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[20]NCBC Statement on "Black Theology," in Wilmore and Cone, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, p. 101. James Cone assisted in the writing of the 1969 statement. His first book *Black Theology and Black Power* was published just several months before the Atlanta meeting.

[21]Vincent Harding cites its failure to develop a regional structure, and its use of rhetoric rather than sound economic and political analysis leading to a program of Black liberation. See "No Turning Back,"in *Renewal* (Oct-Nov. 1970), p. 8. See also Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, p. 201.

[22]J. Metz Rollins, *NCBC Newsletter*, June 1968, p. 5. See also Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), p. 201.

> This new stance of the black church, this coming of age, is a healthy development on the American church scene. Black churchmen have much to contribute out of their background of suffering and oppression to the life of the whole church. Their statements on pressing contemporary issues will bring a new understanding of what it means to be faithful to Jesus Christ in times like these.[23]

Indeed, it was this same conviction that led Leon Watts to proclaim that:

> The National Committee of Black Churchmen is not an ecumenical organization alongside others...It may save Christianity in the Western world by giving it back to the people."[24]

Yet NCBC was not alone in its response to Black Power. There were other important voices that also sought to save Christianity, if not for the entire Western world, then certainly for that segment of the African American community that had already abandoned the faith

Three Characteristics Of Nascent Black Theology

Inspired by the prophetic response of NCBC, other African-American clergy began to address the implications of Black Power for the Black church and its theology. Like the NCBC statements, these early commentaries on Black Power lift up three recurring

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[23]*NCBC Newsletter, op. cit.*
[24]Leon Watts, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

themes: 1) Black Power demands a prophetic critique of the Black church; 2) Black Power is a necessary step toward a more just society and a renewed American church; and 3) Black Power is consistent with biblical Christianity.

Aware that the nationalist critique of Christianity was widely accepted by many in the African American community, prophetic Black clergy leaders responded by subjecting the African American church to a radical, internal self-criticism. Basically, they sought to defend biblical Christianity by confessing that they had failed to practice it in their churches. By accepting the legitimacy of some aspects of the nationalist argument, Black preachers were essentially asking young African Americans to give Christianity and the church a second chance. The use of this strategy proved to be an effective defense at a time when many young people believed that to be Black and Christian was a contradiction in terms.

In 1968 the Philadelphia Council of Black Clergy issued an important statement which reflected this type of self-criticism. In their paper, entitled "Black Religion—Past, Present, and Future," the Philadelphia clerics argued that the aims of Black Power are consistent with the ministry of Jesus Christ. Since Jesus, the source and norm of authentic Christian faith, directed his ministry to the poor and downtrodden, the Black church must make the liberation of the oppressed its primary concern. Conscious of the oppressive role institutional Christianity has played in the African American experience, the Philadelphia group, one of NCBC's major "regional caucuses", reminded the Black church that its "commitment is to Christ and not to Christianity," and that Christ was a revolutionary figure dedicated to the eradication of exploitative and oppressive systems.[25]

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[25]"Black Religion—Past, Present, and Future," in Wilmore and Cone, p. 279.

Calvin Marshall, an NCBC leader and the pastor of Varick Memorial AMEZion Church in Brooklyn, also leveled a prophetic charge against the Black church. Marshall conceded that his denomination failed to live out its historic commitment to Black liberation as preserved in the tradition of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass (all members of the AMEZ Church). Like his clergy counterparts in Philadelphia, Marshall reminded the Black denominations that Jesus was a radical leader who confronted the religious, political, and social systems that oppressed the poor. Claiming that the contemporary Black church had reduced the significance of Jesus' death to the ritual of "breaking bread and sipping wine," Marshall expressed a radical viewpoint that challenged the conservative Christology of the African American churches.

> We are able to talk about the crucifixion of Christ without really understanding that here was a radical, a revolutionary who was put to death for treason. Christ was an anarchist pure and simple. Christ was a Malcolm X.[26]

In addition to engaging in prophetic self-criticism, African American church leaders contended that Black Power was not a call for permanent separation, but rather a necessary step toward a more just American society. Contrary to those who suggested that the church's acceptance of Black Power would jeopardize the universality of the faith, these church leaders maintained that Black Power would actually benefit the entire Christian community. In one form or another, theologians such as Nathan Wright,

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[26]Calvin B. Marshall, "The Black Church—Its Mission is Liberation," in C. Eric Lincoln (ed.) *The Black Experience in Religion* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974), p. 160.

Henry Mitchell, and Gayraud Wilmore expressed this view.

Episcopal clergyman Nathan Wright, Jr. (who served as executive director of the Department of Urban Work for the diocese of Newark, N.J, and chaired the first National Conference on Black Power, July 20-23, 1967) was one of the first leaders to clearly articulate the positive theological implications of Black Power. For Wright, the call to Black Power was essentially a religious opportunity for Black people to fulfill the divine purpose of human growth. Furthermore, he argued that "power is basic to life," and is therefore necessary if "life is to become what God destined it to be."[27] But because African Americans have been systematically oppressed by a White racist society, they have not fully exercised their God-given powers to contribute to the life of the nation. Consequently, Wright held, "Black Americans must be determined to use for their own good, and for the good of the nation as a whole, the latent power of their ethnic numbers."[28]

As he saw it, the civil rights movement emphasized what African Americans are due, while Black Power focuses on what they are capable of giving to themselves and their country. For him, Black Power is a summons to self-sufficiency and independence, the same qualities that other ethnic groups marshalled "to thrust themselves into the mainstream of American life."[29] Far from leading to black separatism, Black Power is a necessary step toward genuine integration:

> Black power in terms of self-development means that we want to fish as all Americans do in the mainstream of American life.[30]

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[27]Nathan Wright, *Black Power and Urban Unrest* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1967), p. 136.

[28]Nathan Wright, "Power and Reconciliation," in *Concern* (October 1, 1967), p. 15.

[29]*Ibid.*, pp. 14, 22.

[30]Wright, *Black Power and Urban Unrest*, p. 106.

For Wright, Black Power is not a mandate for Blacks to hate Whites, rather it is a creative force vital to the peace and growth of the entire nation. Accordingly, he concluded, "It is only as white men see in Black Power a mirror of the abuse of white power that they are frightened."[31]

Like Nathan Wright, the Rev. Thomas Kilgore, Jr. (past president of the American Baptist Convention and Pastor Emeritus of the Second Baptist Church in Los Angeles) believed that the concept of Black Power would strengthen the Black community and lead to the revitalization of American religion as a whole. Kilgore believed that "the black church must win young blacks to Christianity," and threw his considerable prestige behind the new emphasis on Black Power and Black pride. Although he maintained a strong conviction that the true nature of the faith "rises above 'white church' and 'black church,' " he insisted that separate Black organizations like NCBC are needed to help the churches minister more effectively to the specific needs of the African American community.[32]

Kilgore's analysis of Black Power and Christianity makes clear the important link between African American religious thought before and after Black Power. Like the NCBC and Black caucuses in white denominations, Kilgore took the best of the integrationist vision and combined it with a view of Black Power consistent with the universalism of the Christian faith. As a result, he held to the position that as Black and White Christians work together to renew the American church, "we may all come to understand that we are human first, racial or ethnic groups second, and have national and

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[31]*Ibid.*

[32]Thomas Kilgore, Jr., "The Black Church-A Liberating Force For All," in *Ebony* (September 1970), pp. 106-110.

religious ties lastly."[33] The early defenders of Black theology insisted that a creative interpretation of Black Power was a necessary prerequisite for the theological reconstruction of Christianity in the African American community. For them, the acceptance of Black Power and Black culture was indispensable if the African American church was to have any relevance and credibility in Black ghettos throughout the nation. At the same time, they assured skeptics that a distinctively Black interpretation of the faith would not distort its essence. To the contrary, they claimed that a Black theological approach would ultimately enhance Black Christians' awareness of the universality of the gospel.

Two noteworthy essays by Henry Mitchell and Gayraud Wilmore are representative of this position. In a 1968 article entitled "Black Power and the Christian Church," Mitchell argued that African American pastors and seminarians need to have a better appreciation of the distinctive quality of Black religious culture—its music, preaching, worship style, and theology—if they are ever to correct the widespread perception among their youth that "Christianity is the white man's religion." Ironically, Black colleges and seminaries contributed to this false notion by failing to teach the uniqueness of Black Christianity and neglecting the scholarly investigation of the African American religious tradition.[34]

Mitchell makes the point that Black churches that accentuate White culture while deemphasizing the uniqueness of their own religious heritage ("White-culture Black churches"), must either promote the vibrant African-American religious tradition or "join the white churches in a slow, inexorable march to a common

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[33]*Ibid.*, p. 110.

[34]Henry Mitchell, "Black Power and The Christian Church," in *Foundations* (April-July 1968), p. 105.

grave."[35] From the courageous struggle against injustice to the therapeutic value of its worship experience, Black religion has made an enormous contribution to the "psychic wholeness and firm identity" of the African American community. That is why, Mitchell concludes, "black religion is the only means of reaching, helping, and saving the vast majority of black people, both here and hereafter."[36]

Like Mitchell, Gayraud Wilmore believed that the Black church had to immerse itself in African American culture before it could make its full contribution to the wider ecumenical movement. In "The Case For A New Black Church Style," published in 1968, Wilmore warned the church that if it was to continue as a viable institution in the Black community it would have to "end its basic conformity to European theological traditions and Anglo-Saxon structures of value," and revive its historic commitment to Black culture and Black liberation.[37]

Like the other early defenders of Black theology, Wilmore claimed that an emphasis on culture would enhance rather than detract from Black Christians' recognition of the universality of the faith:

> The problem of the whitenized black churches today is how to recover their own self-respect by demythologizing the white cultural bag through which the faith was transmitted to them and in which they have curled themselves up so comfortably. In doing so they may discover that the essence of the Christian faith not only transcends

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[35]*Ibid.*

[36]*Ibid*, p. 100.

[37]Gayraud S. Wilmore, "The Case For A New Black Church Style," in H.M. Nelsen and R. Yokley, *The Black Church in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. 325.

> ultimately the ethnocentric culture of the white man, but that of the black man as well; that this Christ, in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, is also neither black nor white.[38]

Conclusion

The Black Power movement had a tremendous impact on African American religious thought. The radical theology that emerged in the late 1960s and the 1970s was the most exciting outpouring of African American religious thought in the 20th century. With the publication of James H. Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*, a steady stream of books and articles sought to reconstruct Christian faith for a generation of young Blacks who were prepared to abandon it.

The impact made by Black theology was so decisive that until recently scholars neglected the study of African American religious thought just prior to its inception. Although thinkers like Benjamin Mays, Howard Thurman, George Kelsey, and Martin King made huge contributions to religious thought in the African American community, they were not able to respond to the theological challenge presented by Black Power. These great thinkers did not (and indeed could not) think of themselves as *Black* theologians. Their approach to religious experience and their commitment to racial integration led them to think of ethnic and cultural backgrounds as *incidental* to the doing of theology. They believed that all life is interrelated, and so articulated a vision of Christianity that was consistent with integrationist philosophy. Their personal experiences of being excluded made them particularly sensitive to the need of developing inclusive ministries that would transcend

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[38] *Ibid.*

the barriers of race.

But while these pre-Black Power religious thinkers sought to make Christianity relevant for a generation of young people fighting against racial segregation in the South, Black ministers and theologians in the 1960s and 1970s faced the challenge of making the gospel speak to the frustrations of youth in the urban North. Here, African Americans were beginning to realize that racism was supported by deep structural and economic roots. At the same time, Black ministers and theologians realized that if they could not answer the Nation of Islam's claim that "Christianity is the white man's religion," young African Americans would have no part of Black Christianity. Notwithstanding the cultural focus of Black theology during this period and beyond, the differences between it and pre-Black Power religious thought is largely one of emphasis. For pre-Black Power thinkers, stress on the universality of the Christian faith was derived from their concerns about integration and race relations; whereas for post-Black Power theologians, stress on the particularity of Christian faith was derived from a growing nationalist consciousness that affirmed Blackness and self-determination. Yet it is crucial to note that pre-Black Power religious thinkers' emphasis on universality did not mean that they completely ignored the importance of their African heritage; nor did Black theologians' emphasis on Blackness mean that they rejected the universality of the Christian gospel.

The African American clergy who responded positively to the emergence of Black Power claimed that a responsible interpretation of the concept was not a retreat from the ultimate goal of the beloved community envisioned by Martin L. King, Jr. and other pre-Black Power religious thinkers. To the contrary, they insisted that Black Power was a necessary prerequisite to genuine integration. By claiming that Black Power was a means to a truly integrated society they played an important political role in the transition from civil rights to Black Power.

While mediating between the two strategies, between integration and nationalism, prophetic African American clergy sought to defend biblical Christianity from the oft-repeated nationalist critique, "Christianity is the white man's religion." Their efforts to reconcile the particularity of Blackness and the universality of the gospel laid the foundation for the subsequent development of Black theology. The African American clergy who responded positively to the challenges of the Black revolution preserved the best of pre-Black Power religious and political thought in the midst of rapid social and cultural change. That is why James Cone, borrowing Paul Tillich's self-designation, described the early defenders of Black theology as

> theologians "on the boundary" between integration and separation, nonviolence and self-defense, "love our white enemies and love our black skins." They refused to sacrifice either emphasis; they insisted on the absolute necessity of both."[39]

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[39]Cone, *For My People*, p. 59.